Global Capitalism and Local Artistic Taste in Late Imperial/Early Modern China, 1600-1800

Benjamin A. Elman
Gordon Wu '58 Chair Professor of Chinese Studies
Princeton University

Western theorists have accepted the almost unrestrained inflation of “capitalism” as an explanatory concept in economic history since Karl Marx pioneered the use of “capital” to describe the increasing velocity of exchange that allegedly pushed early modern Europe to the forefront of the global economy. Those who marveled at the rise of imperialism in association with capitalism typically subsumed the economic roles of China, India, and the Ottomans to bit players in the fairy tale “rise of the West” after 1500. The traditional economies of Asia by comparison were the “backward” sisters of development. Their “de-industrialization” provided the raw materials for the nineteenth century industrial revolution in Europe, which sat atop the global marketplace like an alleged goliath after 1800. European pundits, of whom Marx was one of the leading voices, proudly proclaimed the superiority of their ways of life, society, politics, and, most of all, economy. What Marx yearned for was socialism, not capitalism.

If we “do the numbers” and “localize the global,” however, this version of a bloated “capitalism” with Europe as its hub does not hold up to careful scrutiny. Moreover, if we follow the flow of “money” between 1500 and 1800, we find instead that its initial velocity was centered in the entrepots of India, China, and the Ottomans. “Redistributing” early modern global dynamics to their “local” components, allows us to recognize the important East Asian networks that helped form the global (Latour, 2005, 173-218). Europeans produced little that Asians might buy before 1800, and the global economy to that point amounted to the de facto transfer of New World silver and gold to the Asian economies.

1. Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1-17, makes the point that sociologists usually mistake “society” as a singular cause for actions when “it” is more properly evaluated as the product of numerous social exchanges between actors and networks. Similarly, we can say that European “capitalism” was more a consequence of a plethora of historical associations than a singular cause of later economic events. The inflation of a concept includes its entification and mystification.

to pay for their commodities. The prodigious sale of porcelain, silk, lacquer ware, and tea to “East India” companies in London, Amsterdam, Paris, Lisbon, Rome, and Madrid via Barcelona and Seville empowered the silver ages of Japan and China, for example.3

The differential in scale of economies between Asia vis-à-vis Europe carried over to population differentials. Spain had a largely agrarian population of three million in 1600, while France’s population in 1800 was about 30 million, exceptionally large by European standards. Ming China during the silver age had at least 150 million people, some say as many as 250 million. By 1800, Chinese population was at least 300 million. Uncountable India was much closer to China in population than to France. The smaller Tokugawa Japan (1600-1858) was comparable to France and had 30 million people by 1700 before entering a still poorly understood period of demographic “stagnation” in the eighteenth century.4

These differentials in scale mean that even if Asia lacked “capitalism,” it monopolized most of the “money” flowing through the arteries and veins of the early modern global economy. If the truth be told, moreover, China experienced a massive print revolution during the Song dynasty (960-1280), including printing money, four centuries before Europe. The print revolution climaxed during the Ming silver age, but massive inflation caused by the uncontrolled printing of money under the Mongols made printed paper money suspect as specie by the end of the Yuan dynasty (1280-1368).5

If we now, with hindsight, recognize these historical realities, we should no longer allow the inflated concept of “capitalism” to trump the underinflated concept of “monies” in Asia. Rather than let the tail continue to wag the dog (by itself capitalism as a “Western” concept does not trump the “Oriental” accumulation of money), we should right the course and see that the Asian global economy was the indispensable precursor to and prerequisite for the European version of the nineteenth century. Asian “money” penetrated the world’s markets long before the concept of “capitalism” remade the world in its European image. Rather than the “me toos” of the early modern world, China, Japan, and India were by 1600 its essential motors and the engines that made Europeans rethink their own political, social, and cultural values informing their economies.

The ideological rationalization of wealth occurred first in China, for instance. There the long term transformation of the god of wealth from a malevolent devil wreaking havoc among the people to a charitable deity who would answer the prayers of educated

commoners for economic prosperity occurred. In recent discussion of China’s transition to modernity, for example, scholars have still tended to under-theorize China’s role in the rise of modern economic growth via international trade and commerce. They mention the Qing network of tollhouses before 1800 and treaty ports after 1842 (van de Ven, 2014), but like John Fairbank and others they continue to underestimate the step-by-step growth of generally peaceful if contested global trade in East China Sea waters, beginning with the eighteenth century Canton trading system.

The Chinese treaty ports that were forced open after the Opium War (1839-1842) thus represented a second stage of development, after what Paul Van Dyke calls the “collapse” of the Canton System. Describing the “Canton System,” Van Dyke stresses that the system depended on Canton’s customs procedures by which “China opens its doors to the world” in the eighteenth century. The late nineteenth century Maritime Customs Service System should be connected to its two institutional predecessors, if we are to obtain a full understanding of the global interactions that the world went through from 1750 to 1950.

Van de Ven gives us a lively and germane account of the last century of China’s trading and customs institutions after 1850, but that is not when the processes of global commercialization became legalized and institutionalized enough to replace the great pirate fleets and marauders, first the Japanese “wako” in East and Southeast Asian waters after 1550, and then their European counterparts after 1600. By relying on what he calls late nineteenth century industrialized “modernity” to describe the growth of “underdevelopment” in Qing China, van de Ven remains uninterested in unravelling the “deep pockets” of India and China during the early modern “silver age,” which have been painstakingly reconstructed over the last decade by Sanjay Subrahmanym, Richard von Glahn, R. Bin Wong, Tim Brook, and Kenneth Pomeranz, among others.

That said, however, Asians did not articulate a concept of “capitalism” per se, but their economic activities evolved from the vibrant growth of layers of cities, towns, and villages tied to regional and international hierarchies of trade within a huge domestic agrarian system. These Asian urban economies were dwarfed by their own vast agrarian sectors, but the ports of China and India in turn dwarfed their European counterparts, where large cities were fed by ever smaller agrarian populations. Over the long run, rising standards of living based on windfall profits from the New World motivated Europeans to trade with and profit from Asia, while Asians unwittingly faced the unprecedented conundrum that rising levels of population would outpace agrarian productivity and drive down living standards. Europeans per capita had more wealth by 1800, what we call “modern economic

---

development” today, but they always trailed the aggregate productivity of Asia.9

Below, I explore an example of a much needed reversal of perspective from the “global” back to the “local,” and then back again. When we look at the global economy in light of Asian local history, we recognize that the velocity of money was redirected in cultural terms via the commoditization of daily life. Chinese, Japanese, and Indians first invented this translation of economic into cultural “capital” for economies of scale. We will explore how silver as “money” during the seventeenth century transition affected Ming dynasty literati taste and Confucian values. The global market place fueled local cultural changes that empowered local classicists in China to move in new and unprecedented directions. Money increasingly “talked” for the many. For some, however, it still “swore.”

Late Ming Classicism in the Context of Commercial Expansion

Both officials and literati concerned themselves with the technical facets of maintaining the late Ming agrarian economy. The latter drew its strength from the productivity of an integrated river-canal-lake system and land-commodity-labor taxes collected from private farms in over 1300 counties where about 90% of China’s population of approximately 150-250 million people lived in 1600. Since 1381, the government had classified the entire population into social and economic categories to determine taxes and measure access to the civil and military examinations. Revised in 1391, this massive undertaking aimed at measuring the economic resources under Ming control, equalizing the distribution of the land tax (paid in kind), and obtaining fair labor services from all households.

Echoing the ancient classical models in the Rituals of Zhou, a text that imperial reformers since antiquity appealed to for contemporary guidance, these classifications, such as households of farmers 農戶, commoners 平民戶, military men 軍戶, artisans 手工業 戶, and merchants 商戶, reflected the initial status of each family in early Ming society and how much labor service they had to provide. The government assigned each household category with a specific labor service it had to perform for the bureaucracy, and these tasks were organized according to village-family 村家 units of 110 households (lijià 里甲) in each community.10

A merchant household was expected to supply merchandise or goods on demand; a military family had to provide at least two soldiers for service; an artisan household provided one worker for imperial workshops. The land registers were supposed to be revised every ten years, and each family was required to perform its labor service in perpetuity.

The wide gap between the theory and practice of Ming tax collection, however, greatly diminished government control of the economy by the sixteenth century. When regional markets gradually turned to a silver currency for large transactions out of the direct control of the government and to pay for land and labor taxes, this confirmed the dynasty’s weakened hold over its agrarian tax resources.\(^{11}\)

Geared to a village commodity economy circa 1400, the Ming tax system became increasingly obsolete as population rose from 65/100 to 150/250 million and the economy became more commercialized. The Ming economy was further transformed by an agrarian revolution in which cotton displaced rice production in southern coastal provinces and the influx of Japanese and New World silver monetarized the sixteenth century economy in unprecedented ways. Ming Chinese unwittingly faced a global marketplace in contrast to Song regional concerns. By the 1570s, the Ming government had bowed to the inevitable and through the Single Whip Reforms 一條鞭法 commuted the land tax and service labor systems into a single monetary payment in silver. China’s demand for silver remained central to the world economy until about 1750.\(^{12}\)

Wang Yangming’s 王陽明 (1472-1529) claim that the principles of things existed in the mind 心即理 accordingly, occurred at a time when literati views of the economy, commodities, and objects and their significance were changing. As China’s population grew from approximately 65/100 to 150/250 million between 1450 and 1600, the reach of the relatively static imperial bureaucracy declined. Similarly, anxious Ming literati wondered if the Cheng-Zhu classical orthodoxy 程朱理學 could still represent universal principles of knowledge at a time when domestic goods and things were financially converted into objects of wealth paid for by using imported silver. Ming literati such as Yuan Huang 袁黄 (1533-1606) worked out the tensions between morality and affluence by creating a new moral calculus for measuring private wealth by keeping track of good and bad deeds in “ledgers of merit and demerit” 功過格.\(^{13}\)

Although literati after Wang Yangming still placed human understanding within a classical theory of knowledge, the quantity and exchange velocity of things in the marketplace had multiplied exponentially. Ming elites were living through a decisive shift away from the traditional ideals of sagehood, morality, and frugality. Within an inter-


\(^{12}\) Ming economic developments were also based in part on the Tang-Song economic revolution, and the traditional trading and tax system of the early empires. Compare (Edward Farmer, “Social Regulations of the First Ming Emperor,” in Kwang-Ching Liu, ed., Orthodoxy in Late Imperial China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 116-123 and Ray Huang, Taxation and Government Finance in Sixteenth-Century China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 1-6.

Fig. 1. Broadly Examining Antiquities (博古圖). The National Palace Museum collection.
regional market economy of exceptional scope and magnitude, gentry and merchant elites transmuted the impartial investigation of things for moral cultivation into the consumption of objects for emotional health and satisfaction. Ming painters presented the contemporary fondness for and connoisseurship of antiquities as a genre known as **Broadly Examining Antiquities** (Bogu tu 博古圖; Fig 1). The paintings valorized the literatus as a collector of exquisite things.\textsuperscript{14}

Late Ming antiquarianism in particular drew its strength from the economic prosperity that pervaded the Yangzi delta. There and elsewhere merchants and literati used their increased financial resources to compete for status through conspicuous consumption. Merchants and literati on their travels searched for ancient works of art, early manuscripts, rare editions, and magnificent ceramics. They paid extravagant sums when they found what they wanted. The rise in value of ancient arts and crafts also touched off increased production of imitations, fakes, and forgeries of ancient bronzes, jades, and ceramics. Late Ming antiquarians with their fixation on possessing things challenged the principled ideals of both Cheng-Zhu 程朱學 learning and Yangming 阳明学 revisionism. For the latter, the former had focused on things too much.\textsuperscript{15}

Wang Yangming rejected the Song Cheng-Zhu theory of knowledge because he thought its epistemology that all things were knowable in light of principles was naive. He rerouted the Cheng-Zhu agenda and reduced all things in the perceptible world to the unified field of the mind’s awareness, where all principles ultimately resided. Wang noted: “Seeking principles in myriad affairs and things is like saying that one should seek the principle of filial piety in one’s parents” (夫求理於事事物物者, 如求孝之理於其親之謂也).\textsuperscript{16}

Things in themselves were banal for Wang and his followers, who demoted the value of things out there precisely when man-made commodities of value proliferated in the marketplace. Wang Yangming’s turn from things to the mind in part refuted the inroads made by connoisseurship 世俗者 and commoditization 物品商品化 among Ming literati. Purists like Wang still sought enlightenment, but they no longer located true principles in the vulgar connoisseur’s world of objects and wealth.\textsuperscript{17}

Late Ming commercial expansion built on the dramatic monetarization of the Chinese economy during the Silver Age of 1550-1650 and unleashed the commoditization of things.
into objects of desire and affection. After the Ming state commutated village and town labor tax services into cash levies, for example, the imperial court and its bureaucracy lost control of its land and labor resources. In effect, during Wang Yangming’s time a decisive shift from a predominantly subsistence livelihood based on a huge agrarian economy to a steadily expanding market economy occurred, which was linked to internal and external networks of provincial, regional, and international trade.  

The increase in internal (between town and village) and external (between provinces) trading links stimulated an escalation in commerce, especially merchant travels and resources. Since late medieval times, the imperial state had provided a shipping infrastructure via the Grand Canal, bridges, and roads for grain tax purposes, which had linked north China and the Yellow River to the Yangzi delta, the granary of the empire since medieval times. The delta was then linked via the Yangzi to its vast middle and upper reaches.

This infrastructure fueled a revolution in domestic cotton production and clothing after 1400 whereby almost all commoners in China by 1600 wore winter garments made from cotton rather than the hemp or flax linens of Song times. Diversification of crops and stress on sericulture and cotton paralleled sophisticated rice transplantation techniques in the middle Yangzi, which increasingly replaced the lower Yangzi region, Wang Yangming’s home region, as the rice granary of the empire. Production of sugar and other cash crops, which traded as commodities in exchange for rice from new areas, which now had rice surpluses, made up for the rice deficits in the more handicraft oriented Yangzi delta.

Specialized towns emerged in which the cultivation of commercial crops such as cotton and silk replaced rice land. In Shandong and Henan, hired northern laborers also grew cotton that was shipped to the Yangzi delta for weaving. Dual-cropping of summer rice and winter wheat had long been common in the south. In this commercialized environment the cultivation and manufacture of cotton and silk using multiple-spindle spinning machines tended to become separate operations with an accompanying division of labor. Local commodity production in the Yangzi delta, for instance, shifted from traditional household handicrafts in the early Ming to merchant-oriented production in family workshops.


Silk, cotton, and rice markets furthered the commercialization of the rural village economy and spurred trading links with towns and cities. Improved seeds, changing crop rotations, and new cash crops such as maize, peanuts, and sweet potatoes from the New World, produced a doubling of grain yields as a complement to the extension of cultivated acreage from 1500 to 1800. Commercialized handicraft production meant that changes in the rural economy produced corresponding changes in the social order for both men and women. Differentiation between urban centers and rural production in village households made peasant producers dependent on market forces and merchant middlemen.  

Until the Ming dynasty, it was generally true that “men till while women weave.” Silk production, that is, spinning, weaving, and raising silkworms, was handled by women who used family looms. By the sixteenth century, however, when taxes were increasingly monetarized, men and women began contributing equally to rural labor in south China. The shift in sericulture from a local, household industry to a new interregional product changed the longstanding gender division of labor. Men now worked at the loom in urban or suburban family workshops, while rural women still produced the cocoons for thread.

For elite consumers, Ming cotton and silk production translated into commoditized fashion, which Tim Brook perceptively notes “traveled through the social structure just as it did through the marketing structure.” Fashionable women, whether wives or courtesans, preferred Suzhou 蘇州 cotton embroideries or Huzhou 湖州 silk brocades, which simultaneously affirmed their modesty (by covering the body) but also enhanced their stylishness (through design). Maids and concubines quickly emulated their masters’ tastes. Rather than affirm the occasional warning about luxurious living or Wang Yangming’s renewed call for moral cultivation, most Ming elites became agents for the transmission of extravagance through style. Purists criticized the affinity they perceived between literati collectors of antiquities and the predilection of their wives and families for silks and furs.

Retreat of the dynasty from direct involvement in village affairs also magnified the role of gentrified elites as landlords in late imperial politics and society. Under the umbrella of the central government, gentry and merchants in the Yangzi delta and elsewhere diversified their hold on local power via profiteering based on land rent and commercial enterprises. As state influence lessened, local public health matters evolved under the umbrella of gentry philanthropy and local literati physicians. Such elites also monopolized positions in the imperial bureaucracy by translating their economic and social power into cultural and educational advantages that enabled mainly the sons of gentry and merchants to pass the

empire-wide civil examinations.24

Expansion of the internal economy matched growth in foreign trade. The spice trade with Southeast Asia, for instance, doubled in the sixteenth century, and Ming China increasingly imported hardwoods from Southeast Asia for furniture, palaces and temples. The Ming and Qing dynasties exported teas to Central Asia in exchange for horses until the eighteenth century. In addition to large profits from cotton goods in the domestic market, Chinese became the world’s largest exporter of manufactured goods, tea, silks, and ceramics. Production costs were kept low due to low overhead and a surplus of labor. Efficient agriculture also kept food prices low.25

Early Ming porcelain was manufactured primarily for the domestic market, principally at kilns in Zhejiang (Longquan 龙泉), Jiangsu (Yixing 宜兴), Fujian (Dehua 德化), and Jiangxi (Jingdezhen 景德镇) provinces. Merchants linked the pottery kilns to their imperial and literati consumers. Traders translated the external demands of the market to the local producers. Later in the dynasty the Ming exported porcelain to Japan and Southeast and South Asia. The Dutch East India Company handled some six million pieces in the seventeenth century, but this number represented only about 16% of Ming ceramic exports. Yixing’s and Jingdezhen’s landlocked factories were linked via lakes and rivers in the lower and middle Yangzi region to southeastern ports such as Xiamen, Fuzhou, and Guangzhou and from there to the Indian Ocean trade and Islamic markets. The blanc-de-Chine 德化白瓷 styles developed at Dehua were for a time extremely popular in seventeenth century Europe and exported in large quantities at the nearby port of Quanzhou.26

The largest pottery factories at Jingdezhen, for example, followed the usual imperial pattern for operating such enterprises, which involved state supervision of merchant activities (quandu shangban 官督商辦). The enterprises were based on the labor of hundreds of artisans who produced the “Mohammedan blue” 穆罕默德蓝 and polychrome ware in the “five colors” (benjarong) manufactured for Siam for which the Ming became famous. Imperial taste and literati connoisseurship deflected the technical discourses of the producers into a sublime discussion of porcelain aesthetics for consumers. With the fall of the Ming, imperial purchases declined, but Jingdezhen revived and remained the major domestic and international producer of porcelain in China until 1800.27

After 1750, Europe gained access to the technical secrets that had made China the leader in pottery-making and ceramic ware for centuries. Many aspects of Ming technologies, including ceramic ware, were included by Song Yingxing 宋應星 (1587-1666?) in his late Ming Creation of All Things Under Heaven (Tiangong kaiwu 天工開物), for example. Because Song described processes that were government monopolies, however, his work was not widely available during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), even though it now constitutes our major source for Ming and Qing technologies and handicrafts.

The proliferation of books and manuals during the late Ming led to the printing of numerous encyclopedias (lei shu 類書, lit., “classified digests” 匯編). Encyclopedias functioned as repositories and manuals of popular knowledge during the late Ming, in addition to serving as scholarly compendiums for students preparing for the imperial examinations. From this environment of readily available reference books, practical manuals, and popular compendiums of knowledge, emerged a book-oriented atmosphere conducive to the development of scholarship and the practical arts.

For instance, the “Street of the Glazed Tile Factory” (Liuli chang 琉璃廠), located in the southern, Han Chinese city inside Beijing, originally a factory site, by the eighteenth century was the major book emporium and center for antiques in Qing China. The Street Factory reached its height as a book market during the Qianlong era, 1736-1795. Because it was located close to the Hanlin Academy, the emporium was a gathering spot for intellectuals, scholars, and degree candidates who came to Beijing. Its cultural atmosphere stressed the value of rare works and ancient artifacts, promoted the exchange of books, and stimulated scholarship during the eighteenth century. Books and manuscripts of all kinds moved freely between Beijing and the main book markets in the Yangzi delta and southeast China.

In addition, the printing of “daily use” encyclopedias (ri yong lei shu 日用類書) in the 1590s was emblematic of a widening publishing world that appealed to the lesser lights of late Ming society, namely, merchants, artisans, and licentiates (shengyuan 生員, i.e., those only licensed to take higher examinations). Presented as repositories of useful information for daily life, popular encyclopedias provided non-elites with a wide choice of subjects dealing with medical prescriptions, divination formulas, ancient lore, astrology, geomantic almanacs, calligraphy, etc. Unlike reference books for elites that focused primarily on the civil examinations, elite family ritual, and classical learning, many late Ming encyclopedias included information on travel and lodging useful to merchants. Such attention to the


practical needs of non-elites in provinces such as Fujian meant that compilers and printers were no longer limited to orthodox topics. They could present the material aspects of normal life in rich detail for a broad audience of new readers.  

Building on a new realism that also informed late Ming fiction, ribald novels such as *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅) presented protagonists who owned drugstores, for example. Composed by an author who was writing as daily use encyclopedias proliferated, the book, circulating as a manuscript in the late 1590s, presented an inventory of things, money, objects, collectables, events, and skills that ranged from medical potions for enhancing sexual prowess to elaborating food at banquets, drinking games, and popular jokes. The fictional contents of the novel enlivened but also mirrored the categories and contents of the narrative-less encyclopedias. The latter was where authors got their detailed information about popular songs and daily life experiences, which they emplotted in the new realism of the time. In this publishing environment, novels and encyclopedias represented different aspects of a burgeoning commercial environment that was reaching non-traditional audiences.

While the late Ming novel often made officials the villains, the more mundane practical encyclopedia leveled the field to include low-brow interests alongside elite tastes and conventions. Such trends challenge our image of Ming learning. Was Wang Yangming learning really representative of late Ming literati? The appearance of many practical compendia on things, affairs, and phenomena, which flowered into an eruption of daily use encyclopedias in the 1590s, contrasted sharply with the high-minded claims of the Yangming schoolmen that the principles of all things were already in the mind. Yangming idealism was more a reaction to than an obstacle for the collection and investigation of things of cultural cum financial value. Wang’s high-brow idealism represented a classical rejoinder to the widespread low-brow commoditization of things during the late Ming. Many other works predated, led up to, or paralleled the late Ming encyclopedias. They also enunciated the problem of knowledge in light of the investigation of things as a textual inventory of objects.

The increasing market for published works during the late Ming represented a time of


expanding classical and popular literacy. Late Ming followers of Cheng-Zhu learning in turn superficially blamed the crisis of knowledge on Wang Yangming’s misplaced idealism rather than rampant connoisseurship. They reacted by stressing even more the concrete aspects of Zhu Xi’s search for informing principles (li 理, i.e., “coherence”) in the reality of the world (qi 氣). Literati authors also embodied the realm of qi in late Ming literature and poetry by instantiating it in human emotions (qing 情). At the same time, Wang Yangming radically prioritized the principles of things in the mind at the expense of the emotions.33

Collecting and Classifying Things in Ming China on the Eve of Jesuit Contacts

By the time the Jesuits arrived in Ming China, many Han Chinese literati were debating an appropriate theory of knowledge. The debate often took the form of claims that morality (zun dexing 尊德性) took precedence over formal knowledge (dao wenxue 道問學) or vice versa. The focus of the debate in Ming China was on the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge (gewu zhizhi 格物致知). Ming literati invoked a sense of urgency in their encyclopedic efforts to reconstruct the textual lives of things at a time when the meaning and human significance of natural and manmade objects as commodities for the many betrayed the ideals of moral cultivation for the few.34

Jesuits tried to reshape this research agenda by mediating between what they thought was China and their West (Taixi 泰西, i.e., early modern Western Europe). They would add precision to the Chinese notion of investigating things and extending knowledge by exposing Ming literati to European classification schemes, forms of argument, and the organizational principles for all specialized knowledge, i.e., scientia 前現代科學. They never grasped, however, that what was happening in Ming China, namely the commoditization of things into objects of material value, was also sweeping through Western Europe. Mexican silver dollars coming to China were the first steps of disenchantment about the moral investigation of things for Chinese literati—merchants as it was for the early modern European bourgeoisie.35

Ordering Antiquities and New Findings

The investigation of things was conceptually also applied to the collection, study, and classification of antiquities, as in Cao Zhao’s 曹昭 (fl. 1387–99) Key Issues in the Investigation of Antiquities (Gegu yaolun 格古要論), which was published in the early Ming and enlarged several times. The work originally appeared circa 1387-1388 with important accounts of

ceramics and lacquer, as well as traditional subjects such as calligraphy, painting, zithers, stones, bronzes, and ink-slabs. It became an exemplar for late Ming antiquarians.  

The 1462 edition prepared by Wang Zuo 王佐 (palace graduate of 1427) was considerably enlarged and included findings prepared by several members of the official Ming dynasty naval expeditions led by Admiral Zheng He 鄭和 (1371-1433) to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean from 1405 to 1433. Ma Huan’s 馬歡 (fl. 1413-1451) Captivating Views of the Ocean’s Shores (Yingyai shenglan 瀛涯勝覽; 1433), for example, had described the twenty countries the fleet visited and included detailed accounts of Yemeni towns such as Dhufar and Aden in southern Arabia.  

In addition to such descriptions, Wang Zuo was particularly interested in ancient bronzes, calligraphic specimens, and native curiosities. He also added native imperial seals, iron tallies, official costumes, and palace architecture to the collection. In his preface, Wang added: “Whenever you see an object, you must read all about it in the repertories, study its provenance, classify its quality, and judge its authenticity” 凡見一物，必遍閱圖譜，究其來歷，格其優劣，別其真偽，而後已. Archaic looking fakes produced by clever craftsmen for the Ming market of cultural commodities posed significant financial dangers for literati.  

Unlike the impact sixteenth century oceanic discoveries allegedly had in early modern Europe, the new information the Zheng He fleets brought back to Ming China from Southeast and South Asia in the fifteenth century did not challenge the existing frameworks of orthodox knowledge. Donald Lach has argued, for instance, that the early modern European world “underwent a transformation in the sixteenth century which produced in observers a sense of mild shock, wary fascination, or deep wonderment.” Lach acknowledges, however, that many scholars “remained oblivious to the rents in the curtain obscuring the East.” Those who were alert to the new findings realized that neither classical nor Christian learning in Europe could encompass the latest information, unusual artifacts, and geographical discoveries, or duplicate the more advanced technical arts of India and China in textile manufacture and porcelain production.  

More recently, however, Michael Ryan, following Lucien Febvre, has argued that the newly discovered lands and new peoples registered little impact on the values, beliefs,

---

and traditions of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europeans. We might add that the overwhelming intellectual influence in sixteenth century Europe came from classical Greek manuscripts sent to Europe from Constantinople in 1453 and not from oceanic voyages. Similarly, Ryan rejects Lach’s view that new forms of cultural relativism emerged in Europe. Instead, Ryan has examined how these new worlds were incorporated into a European lexicon by asking how European contemporaries interpreted their world. Their use of categories such as ancient paganism as a trans-historical framework to classify the cultures of the new worlds enabled them to domesticate exotic peoples within the frame of Graeco-Roman pagan antiquity.\footnote{40}

Europeans understood other peoples in light of familiar genealogies, which minimized the impact of new worlds by conceptualizing new worlds within the terms of the old one. In 1669 John Webb (1611-1672) contended that after the biblical deluge Noah’s son Sem and his people had entered China. Athanasius Kircher (1601-1680), a Jesuit scholar who thought China a derivative of Egypt, thought that Cham was the better choice. The Jesuits maintained that all people in the world descended from Noah’s three sons (Sem, Cham, and Japheth). Europeans usually regarded Sem as the ancestor of Asian peoples. When Chinese converts translated the Jesuit argument that the earliest Chinese were of foreign origin, however, this provoked an attack by Jesuit critics in Qing court circles in 1664 and led to the martyrdom of the converts.

Ryan has contended that the new worlds were discovered by the Europeans, which implies some sort of ownership of their discovery. Later, however, literati in Ming China also discovered and incorporated the world of Europe introduced by the Jesuits. If the discovery of the new worlds in early modern Europe coincided with the recovery of the ancient pagan world, then an alternative, parallel, and contemporary assimilative process occurred that we can call the Chinese discovery of the West (Taixi 泰西), not to mention their discovery of China. Moreover, after the Jesuit arrival in Ming China, literati who welcomed them prepared parallel but opposite narratives to place “Western learning” within the boundaries of China’s classical antiquity.\footnote{41}

A century prior to the Jesuit arrival, Ming literati had widely applied their paradigm for investigating things and extending knowledge. The approach had enough authority to allow the compilers of the Key Issues in the Investigation of Antiquities 格古委論, for instance, to domesticate the new materials brought by the Ming navy from the Indian Ocean within a traditional focus on encyclopedias and their already established range of classifications. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in China were certainly not “centuries of wonder.”


Leaving out the “discovered” and their reception of their “discoverers,” however, leaves us with a one-sided historical narrative. Moreover, the Chinese had been learning about the Old World via Islam in Central Asia and Persia all along and had never experienced the isolation out of which Europeans broke.

Any claim that most Ming literati, when compared to their European contemporaries, engaged in a subjectivist and idealist discourse about things is off the mark. Indeed, Mark Elvin has misread his sources to contend that Wang Yangming and his sixteenth century followers led most Ming literati away from the precocious intellectual promise of objectivist science and natural studies in Song times. In Elvin’s dated but still re-published view, the pervasive influence of Wang Yangming was one of the three key factors (the others were: (1) filling in of the south China frontier; and (2) the closed door policy of the dynasty), which had doomed Ming China to failure in its global competition with early modern Europe. 42

Moreover, the popular encyclopedias outlined below make it clear that Ming compilers of encyclopedias never took literally Wang Yangming’s efforts to find the principles of bamboo through meditative techniques. We need to address the roots of these practical compendia of things, affairs, and phenomena, which were printed as a wide variety of “daily use” encyclopedias 日用類書 of the 1590s. They contrast sharply with the high-minded claims of the Yangming schoolmen that the principles of all things were “innate in the mind” 良知. 43

Collecting the Collectors

The Ming scholar-merchant and Hangzhou bookseller Hu Wenhuan 胡文煥 (fl. ca. 1596), like Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518-1593), prefigured the Sino-Jesuit dialogue concerning the investigation of things and European scientia in the early seventeenth century when he compiled and published his widely circulated Collectanea for Investigating Things and Extending Knowledge (Gezhi congshu 格致叢書) in the 1590s. This collection of books published as a set embodied a repository of classical, historical, institutional, medical, and technical works from antiquity to the present in China. The collectanea also contributed to the growing late Ming literature of material culture. Its wide dissemination in Ming-Qing China and Japan, in many editions from Hu Wenhuan’s Hangzhou and Nanjing print shops, marks it as a very influential and thus representative work. It did not have the scholarly pedigree of the Systematic Materia Medica (Bencao gangmu 本草綱目), but Hu’s Collectanea affords us a

unique window onto more common divisions of knowledge among the *hoi polloi*. Hu had successfully commoditized classical learning in an age of Ming connoisseurship.44

Although provincial informants mentioned 200 sets of the *Collectanea* (格致叢書) in the 1780s, the compilers of the Qianlong Imperial Library catalog criticized its unevenness, looked down on Hu’s profit oriented marketing of several editions, and only summarized its content in the official catalog. It was not included in the Library. Nevertheless, its extensive circulation in many published forms allows us to access a representative world of pre-Jesuit natural knowledge and lore. Analyzing its subject matter allows us to go beyond Borges’ and Foucault’s ahistorical musings about quaint Chinese encyclopedias. The *Collectanea for Investigating Things and Extending Knowledge* presented a cumulative account via a collection of books of all areas of knowledge important to a literati and *nouveau riches* audience before the Jesuits made their presence felt in Ming literati circles in South China after 1611.45

Because Hu Wenhuan also had wide-ranging interests in medicine and popular religion, some versions of the collectanea contained a broad range of illumination texts and esoteric writings, which I will discuss below. In addition to addressing the collectanea in light of its many variant editions, I will also analyze its initial, pre-Jesuit focus on early lexicons and natural histories, which overlapped with classical learning and natural studies during the late Ming. The smaller, more orthodox version of the collectanea thus parallels the distancing of the queer and supra-normal in some Song encyclopedias of the tenth century.46

For example, the Northern Song *Materials of the Taiping Xing Guo Era (976-983) for the Emperor to Read* (*Taiping yulan* 太平御覽) did not include unusual phenomena or paranormal novelties from medieval times. Moreover, the compilers declined to present grotesques, strange plants, animals and minerals, and odd countries that appeared in the *Expanded Records of the Taiping Xingguo Era* (*Taiping guangji* 太平廣記), which focused on popular religion.

The taxonomy informing the *Materials of the Taiping Era* was more representative of high-brow literati tastes, which were reproduced in the Song genre of jottings (*biji* 筆記).


The latter were generally about fictional, historical, or textual material that was preserved by their authors as odd notes. Earlier interests encompassing natural phenomena and supernormal topics in jottings had waned. Thereafter, most jottings were about recollections of court events, celebrated fellow officials, and experiences in the civil service.  

On the other hand, even though the Expanded Records was less consonant with orthodox encyclopedias, its contents were representative of lower-brow literati and echoed the nourishing of life (yangsheng 養生) traditions that permeated popular religion and medical discussions on prolonging life and achieving immortality. This dual track of Song encyclopedias was never mutually exclusive, however, and the creative tension between them continued in later Ming collections of books published as a set, such as Hu Wenhuans’s Collectanea. 

The Life of a Late Ming Scholar-Printer-Collector

We glean from Hu’s many prefaces to the works he collated a sense of his life and work as a scholar-printer. His grandfather and father were both Hangzhou collectors and printers, and many of Hu Wenhuans’s reprints came from his family’s cultural traditions. Between 1592 and 1597, Hu wrote some 49 prefaces for works he compiled and published. Hu and his staff assembled some 500 works in his Hangzhou and Nanjing print shops, which made their way, selectively, into the enlarged versions of the Collectanea for Investigating Things and Extending Knowledge and other collectanea that Hu printed.

Hu Wenhuan had several colleagues who shared his bookman’s interests and helped compile his works. In addition to collation, they provided prefaces and encomia in Hu Wenhuan’s series. One of them, Zhang Lun 張倫, was also the teacher in the Hu 胡 family school, which indicates that he was well versed in classical learning and that like Hu he was a licentiate 生員 who had not advanced further on the examination ladder. Another, Chen Bangtai 陳邦泰 helped in printing the books. Hu’s family printing shop in Hangzhou became known as the “Hu-Chen Great Print Shop” 胡陳大印刷書坊, which suggests Chen’s importance to the enterprise.

Hu himself was a Nanjing imperial school student, who likely had purchased his licentiate status to enable him to compete in local qualifying examinations. Like Li Shizhen,

---


then, Hu Wenhuan had attained a high level of classical literacy and literary ability, but also never attained a higher provincial or metropolitan degree. By the late Ming, of the 50,000 candidates empire-wide competing triennially for some 1,200 provincial degrees, fewer than three per cent would succeed. Because few like Hu Wenhuan ever became provincial graduates, the Ming dynasty required licentiates to keep taking biennial renewal examinations to maintain their special legal status. Like most such students, Hu did not attend his assigned school. The rolls of local official schools increasingly were filled with candidates who had repeatedly failed higher examinations and had nowhere else to go.\(^{50}\)

Hu used two studio names, one known as the “Hall of Writings Brought Together” (Wenhui tang 文會堂) in Hangzhou and the other called the “Office of Thoughts of Retirement” (Sichun guan 思淳館) in Nanjing. His other sobriquets, such as “Penetrating the Arcane” (Dongxuan 洞玄), also suggest his sympathies with the esotericism associated with popular religion. As the southern capital of the Ming, Nanjing was an important publishing center in the Yangzi delta, along with Hangzhou and Suzhou. Consequently, Hu also relied on the Nanjing book market for many of his editions, although they were mainly published in Hangzhou. Hu’s range of focus, from orthodox classical texts to esoteric medical writings on nourishing life (yangsheng 養生), were tied to his examination studies and his weak health as a youth.\(^{51}\)

In addition to books and texts, Hu Wenhuan also collected antiques and musical instruments. He was interested in tea as a cultural phenomenon, as well as wines and perfumes. The financial benefits from his printing enterprise, based on selling many different series of his printed works or individual volumes from the collection, enabled Hu to maintain the life style of a literati scholar with wide cultural interests even though he had failed to gain an official appointment. By the late Ming, merchant and literati collectors like the Hu family grew and diversified. Hu Wenhuan finally received an appointment in 1613 and served as a low-level county official in Hunan province, first as a magistrate’s aide, and then as an administrative clerk. While Wenhuan was away, the Hu publishing enterprise diminished.

In sum, then, Hu was a merchant-scholar of wide-ranging literati interests, and the large scale collectanea that he compiled, collated, and printed before 1613 preserved many rare texts for his Ming contemporaries, though his editions were later criticized for their poor quality.\(^{52}\)

\(^{50}\) Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations, 646 and 661-665.
\(^{52}\) Wang Baoping, 1999, 52-55. See also Chum Shum, comp. An Annotated Catalog of Chinese Rare Books in the Harvard- Yenching Library (Shanghai: Cishu chuban she, 1998), Vol. 1. 312 (#054), 339 (#0588 and #0590), which includes individually sold volumes of the Gezhi congsha.
Collecting Things in Texts

The proliferation of late Ming daily-use encyclopedias—many of which Hu Wenhuan’s Collectanea prominent contained—reflected a widening audience for information about things, phenomena, and affairs of all sorts. The accruing knowledge of things and affairs among Ming scholars was still subsumed within the moral and philosophical frameworks that informed the orthodox literati classification of the natural world and drew on the classical repertoires of knowledge outlined above. These repertoires notably included medieval masters of esoterica such as Zhang Hua, 張華, who were central to the late imperial definition of a cumulative knowledge of things and phenomena. Although the classical lexicons and natural histories were the beginning points, the knowledge in ancient canonical texts and their commentaries were insufficient.

Literati deployed things in encyclopedias and the collectanea by presenting chronological or topical presentations of past glosses about them. Things, events, and anomalies were displayed textually and sometimes pictorially. In time, words as glosses, that is, the textual lives of things, took precedence over any analysis of the things signified. As a result, natural studies became a venue for Chinese textual scholars who were fascinated with the etymologies of the words. Sages had created such words to encompass phenomena. Hence, they were also important as a genealogy of items in the classics. Unlike early modern European scientific culture, where natural history was increasingly displayed as concrete items in a museum, the array of entries about things included in Hu Wenhuan’s collectanea of early lexicons and encyclopedias converted natural phenomena into words in a text that needed to be decoded primarily through the analysis of language.

Paula Findlen has described the new attitudes toward nature as a collectable entity and new techniques of investigation that informed natural history in early modern European scientific culture. The first science museums were repositories of technology, curiosities, and wonders that built on Pliny’s encyclopedic definition of nature in his Natural History as everything that was worthy of memory. Europeans coped with the empirical explosion of materials that the wider dissemination of texts, increased travel, voyages of discovery, and more systematic forms of communication had made possible by establishing private museums, which became state sponsored institutions from the eighteenth century onward. Such museum collections became symbols of prestige and power, and collectors entertained the image of knowledge without end more widely in the seventeenth century. 53

If we consider Paula Findlen’s tripartite focus on the linguistic, philosophical, and social matrices that gave museums a precise intellectual and spatial configuration, the role of museums as a venue to experience nature, and the sociology of collecting and its cultural logic, then we can see that in late imperial China this sort of collecting and classifying

knowledge about things occurred within the pages of collectanea and encyclopedias. Just as the museum was firmly set in the premodern European encyclopedic tradition of catalogs and the vocabulary of collecting, so the daily-use encyclopedias of the late Ming were sites of classically derived knowledge where individuals of privilege and learning earned the right to collect and classify the world. Others could participate in such collecting by visiting things in the texts that they purchased.

Hu Wenhuan’s merchant-scholar-printer status in Hangzhou and Nanjing publishing circles allowed him to participate in high-brow activities at the same time that he published works for profit aimed at popular audiences. The first increased the classical prestige of his collecting and reprinting information from lexicons and natural histories. Hu elevated his own curiosity about things and phenomena to a virtue that was entirely appropriate for gentlemanly behavior. Likewise, Li Shizhen’s much more analytic work on pharmacopoeia approximated the role of the collector of natural objects—or information about them—as parallel to the Learning of the Way scholar who investigated things, or someone who collected objects.54

If the museum became a site of encyclopedic dreams and humanist sociability in sixteenth century Europe, collecting information about things in the late Ming was not yet a prelude to display (in museums) or manipulation (in laboratories). Li Shizhen certainly shared the naturalist’s agenda. Moreover, his pilgrimages to collect medicines and herbs were done through fieldwork and perusing texts. His natural studies remained focused on remedies. Secondarily, he was fascinated with the etymologies of terms for living things, which could then be applied via the investigation of things to classify appropriate medicines. Ming collectors (such as Hu Wenhuan) of encyclopedias never expressed a penchant for purely experiential knowledge obtained in the laboratory, although medical men continued to produce empire-wide a rich plethora of medicines and accessories for traditional Chinese healing. Li Shizhen did so as well.55

In early modern Europe, gentlemen enriched their collecting experiences by increasing the presence of animal skeletons and fossils in the museum. The new culture of experiential demonstration transformed the museum into a site of medical knowledge, within which competition over the control of knowledge between apothecaries and physicians-professors ensued. Nevertheless, the modern category of natural science had no formal meaning for the European naturalist in the sixteenth century any more than it did in the late Ming. To compare the historical context for early modern scientific culture in Europe and natural knowledge in late Ming collectanea and encyclopedias, we need to problematize the

54. Findlen, Possessing Nature, 8, 15, 98, 121 and 293.
historical teleologies that turn the past purely into prologue.⁵⁶

Collecting as a research agenda rearranged the boundaries of natural studies in Europe, but the coexistence of the old and new, the occult and the demonstrable, in early natural history was as prevalent in Europe as in the late Ming. Even after the Jesuits arrived in Ming China, no one there or in Europe singled out and privileged natural science. Later in the seventeenth century, via Bacon, European scholar-gentlemen dismantled older forms of natural philosophy in favor of a new empiricism. Galileo, Descartes, and Newton transformed such high-minded empiricism into the concrete beginnings of physical science in Europe after the Jesuits arrived in China.

Efforts to normalize the “marvelous” in Ming China turned the collection of information about things into a form of classical knowledge gained through encyclopedic research, which defended itself using the rhetoric of orthodox moral cultivation, i.e., to investigate things and extend knowledge. Rather than microcosms of nature, collections of early lexicons and Ming encyclopedias created textual museums for their theater of marvels. Hu Wenhuan’s efforts in the 1590s to collect the collectors within a single collection of books published as a set was not unique. His economic resources allowed him to produce and publish several collectanea he deemed appropriate to place under the general heading of investigating things and extending knowledge (gezhi). His initial reconstruction of the ancient lexical texts allowed him to use them as an orthodox base for enlarged editions of his Collectanea, which included domains of knowledge that exceeded the boundaries of the official canon.

During the late Ming, conspicuous consumption based on global commerce vicariously impacted on literati life and elite taste in gardens, paintings, books, and antiquities. The expanding literati appetite for consumption carried over to the eighteenth century. The patrons of late Ming and early Qing garden estates, for example, lived in a world where silver from the New World was exchanged to pay for Chinese commodities, principally silk, porcelain, tea, and jade. The Ming economy was further transformed by an agrarian revolution in which cotton displaced rice production in southern coastal provinces and the influx of Japanese silver heightened the monetarization of the sixteenth century economy in unprecedented ways. Ming Chinese unwittingly faced a global marketplace. Their arts and letters would never be the same again.⁵⁷